Complicating Art History

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Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art, edited by *James Romaine* and *Phoebe Wolfskill,* University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2017, 204 pp., 33 col. and 22 b. & w. illus., hardback, $79.95

Let's also make gods. Black gods. Disconcertingly Black. Variations of black. (Aaron Douglas to Langston Hughes, 1925)

In his formative essay 'Iconography after Identity' (2005), Kobena Mercer identifies what he calls an 'optical wobble' in the reception and scholarship of work by BAME artists. He arguess that pushing racial and ethnic backgrounds to the fore has an unfortunate side-effect, producing an 'emphasis on the artist's identity and on the institutional policies of the art world' that 'has […] significantly deflected our attention away from the relative autonomy of the art object itself.'[1] Mercer's comments spring from the ongoing reassessment of black British artistic activities in the 1980s. But his point about the 'optical wobble' echoes through wider trans-Atlantic dialogues and interventions, scholarly attempts to interrogate the elisions and omissions produced when art objects are given meaning only in relation to cultural and racial differences. The fourteen essays brought

together by James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill in *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art* expand and enrich these debates. Broadening and complicating unhelpful assumptions around blackness and Christian devotion, the two editors take up the complex and varied relationships between African-American artists and Christian subject matter. Their anthology is structured to enable interrogation of these complexities, with chapters that focus incisively on key works, ranging from the late nineteenth-century sculptures of Edmonia Lewis to lithographs produced by Jacob Lawrence in the late 1980s. It is this sharp focus on individual artists and their artworks that is the real strength of this publication, a first and pioneering scholarly examination of how individual African-American artists have visualised Christian subjects.

Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s *Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)* (1933) provides a striking point of departure for the anthology's aim to '[integrate] religion and race into the matrix of factors that influence art production, use and interpretation.' (p. 3) The conspicuous crucifix in Motley's self-portrait is first discussed in Romaine and Wolfskill's thoughtful and thought-provoking introduction, and then again in Wolfskill's single-authored essay on the intersections of Christianity and class in Motley's work. The crucifix in his workspace becomes a cipher for how Christianity looms in the background of the story of twentieth-century African-American art. The naturalistic tones and

contemplative stillness of Motley's self-portrait – where his Catholicism confronts us with the artist's class privileges – are thrown into sharp relief when compared to his well-known street scenes like *Getting Religion* (1948) and *Untitled (Street Scene, Chicago)* (1936). These colourful and energetic images of vernacular religious practices in Chicago's store-front churches underscore the diversity of religious practices in the aftermath of the Great Migration. At the same time, they evince Motley's thoughtful interest in 'carefully articulating not a unified blackness but instead group distinctions.' (p. 72-3) Here, depicting Christ on the cross, and religiosity more broadly, is simultaneously personal and social, religious and racial. These intersections are also explored in Carla Williams' chapter on James VanDerZee's photographs of crowded churches and leading figures in Harlem's diverse places of worship.

Whilst the 'New Negro' movement is framed in the popular imagination as a quintessentially American formation, the importance of transnational exchanges to that creative milieu has been well documented, not least in Richard J. Powell and David Bailey's *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (1997).[2] In fact, transnational exchanges constitute a recurring if not always explicitly addressed theme in the volume under review, which unsurprisingly includes artists who visited, lived in or simply looked across the Atlantic. For example, this is the case for Kirsten Pai Buick's essay on place,

religion and the reception of Edmonia Lewis's work. Buick's focus on the artist's representation of Christian subjects includes a brief but notable section on images of the Virgin; however, it is Buick's explorations of how Lewis's Catholicism shaped critical and economic support for her work across Boston, Rome, Paris and London that contributes most substantially to the still limited literature on this sculptor. Further connecting place to subject matter, Romaine's account of vision and belief in key works by the nineteenth-century painter Henry Ossawa Tanner posits the artist's move from Philadelphia to France as a catalyst for his visualisation of religious themes. At a distance from the 'fundamental iconoclastic character of American Protestantism and particularly its intolerance to visual representations of religious subject' (p. 10), Tanner constructed complex biblical compositions examining the aesthetic and spiritual implications of sight. Building on Richard J. Powell's scholarship on William H. Johnson, Amy K. Hamlin examines this artist's personal and aesthetic links to European Expressionism, not least in his family ties to the German sculptor Christopher Voll.

Johnson's work raises further key themes that recur throughout the publication. These include a black Christ, depicted in his *Jesus and the Three Marys* (1939-40) but also by the sculptor Richmond Barthé in *The Mother* (1935) and in the liturgical works of Allan Rohan Crite. The links between the

imagery of lynched bodies and Christ in Barthé's work are drawn together in an insightful essay by James Smalls, who examines how Christian motifs and themes opened up space for this sculptor to reflect on his identity as a black, closeted, Catholic man. Echoing Barthé's use of Christian imagery to comment on pressing contemporary issues, Horace Pippin's *Holy Mountain* series (1944-6) provides the principal point of focus for an excellent chapter by Richard J Powell. He shows how Pippin draws on religious subjects and motifs to reference the Second World War. Similarly, Rohan Crite's representation of a black Christ, Virgin Mary and God, all inhabiting the artist's own Boston neighbourhood, form the subject of a chapter by Julia Levin Caro. To scholars of black and Afro-Asian British art histories, these sections will provide interesting points of departure for exploring works such as Francis Newton Souza's *Crucifixion* (1959).

A further theme raised by Hamlin, and also woven through the chapters on Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas and Jacob Lawrence, is the use of modernist artistic vocabularies to address faith, religious practice and iconography. In an essay on Bearden's less well-known religious works, Kymberly N. Pinder examines the intersection of rebirth and transcendence effected in the artist's modernist, abstract language. The importance of this aesthetic strategy is further highlighted in Douglas's use of flattened, abstract forms in his book-illustrations for *God's*

Trombones (1927) by James Weldon Johnson, subject of an illuminating chapter by Caroline Goeser. Such an interplay between text and modernist image arises again in Lawrence's *Genesis Creation Sermon* series (1989). Looking to the artist's engagement with expressionist ideas around colour and structure, Kristin Schwain argues that Lawrence celebrates and modernises the role of both the preacher and the King James Bible within forms of African-American religious practice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, several of these powerfully modernist works have drawn race-based criticism, having been wilfully misunderstood as evidence for a 'racial' 'primitive' or 'Negro' art. In her case-study of works by Malvin Gray Johnson, Jacqueline Frances traces how this critical hunt for signs of 'Negro art' have marginalised modernist readings of artworks with spiritual themes. In the process, she powerfully exposes this especially problematic facet of Mercer's 'optical wobble'.

Each of the chapters in Romaine and Wolfskill's anthology deploys differing methodological and critical tools to discuss an equally diverse array of artists and artworks. Nevertheless, they are skilfully woven together by a shared focus on Christ and Christianity. As a whole, this richly illustrated volume showcases the sheer diversity of religious and artistic approaches, methods and motivators. In this manner, the anthology sets a model for art-historical scholarship seeking to move beyond the boundaries of racial and ethnic identities. This

is not to say that race is (or should be) absent from such discussions. But, rather, by building on extant literature rooted in questions of racial identity to consider a wider matrix of factors, this anthology provides a fuller account of artists who are African-American and many other things besides. As such, *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art* is a fine addition to the bookshelves of anyone interested in the history of Christian themes and subjects in art. At the same time, it engages with current trans-Atlantic dialogues around the art-historical reassessment of black artists and, more broadly, the unfixed, perhaps unfixable, notion of 'black art'.

Notes

[1] Kobena Mercer, 'Iconography after Identity', in David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce, eds, *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Art in 1980s Britain*, Durham, NC, 2008, 53.

[2] David A. Bailey and Richard J. Powell, eds, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, Los Angeles and London, 1997.